

## Part One: A Son Seeks a Father

### Book 1: Athena Advises Telemachus

Homer opens with an invocation, or prayer, asking the Muse<sup>o</sup> to help him sing his tale. Notice how the singer gives his listeners hints about how his story is to end.

Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story of that man skilled in all ways of contending,<sup>o</sup> the wanderer, harried for years on end, after he plundered the stronghold on the proud height of Troy.

5 He saw the townlands and learned the minds of many distant men, and weathered many bitter nights and days in his deep heart at sea, while he fought only to save his life, to bring his shipmates home. But not by will nor valour could he save them, for their own recklessness destroyed them all— children and fools, they killed and feasted on the cattle of Lord Helios, the Sun, and he who moves all day through heaven took from their eyes the dawn of their return. 15 Of these adventures, Muse, daughter of Zeus, tell us in our time, lift the great song again.

We learn that Odysseus is alive, twenty years older than when he had left for the war in Troy. He is being kept prisoner on Ogygia, the island of the nymph Calypso, who wants him for herself.

Meanwhile, the gods on Mount Olympus are discussing Odysseus! His patroness there, the goddess Athena, begs her father, Zeus, to allow Odysseus to return safely to his home in Ithaca. But Odysseus has an enemy among the gods. The sea god, Poseidon, is angry at the hero for having blinded his son, the Cyclops called Polyphemus. Zeus agrees with Athena, and Hermes, the messenger god, is to be sent to Ogygia to command Calypso to free Odysseus.

Athena's next move is to make her way to Ithaca to help Odysseus's young son, Telemachus, cope with another problem. His home—the palace of Odysseus—is overrun by his mother's suitors. Those arrogant men have taken over Odysseus's house. They are partying on the boy's inheritance and are demanding that his mother, Penelope, take one of them as a husband.

Here we now have the main themes of the epic:

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1. A boy must struggle to become a man.
2. A soldier must struggle to get home from a war.
3. A king must struggle to reclaim a kingdom (Ithaca).

Now the goddess Athena arrives on the scene in Ithaca. Disguised as Mentor, an old family friend, she mingles with the mob of suitors and waits to talk to Telemachus:

Long before anyone else, the prince Telemachus now caught sight of Athena—for he, too,

20 was sitting there, unhappy among the suitors, a boy, daydreaming. What if his great father came from the unknown world and drove these men, like dead leaves through the place, recovering honor and lordship in his own domains?

25 Then he who dreamed in the crowd gazed out at Athena.

Straight to the door he came, irked with himself to think a visitor had been kept there waiting, and took her right hand, grasping with his left her tall bronze-bladed spear. Then he said warmly:

30 "Greetings, stranger! Welcome to our feast. There will be time to tell your errand later."

He led the way, and Pallas Athena followed into the lofty hall. The boy reached up and thrust her spear high in a polished rack against a pillar, where tough spear on spear of the old soldier, his father, stood in order.

35 Then, shaking out a splendid covertlet, he seated her on a throne with footrest—all finely carved—and drew his painted armchair near her, at a distance from the rest.

40 To be amid the din, the suitors' riot, would ruin his guest's appetite, he thought, and he wished privacy to ask for news about his father, gone for years.

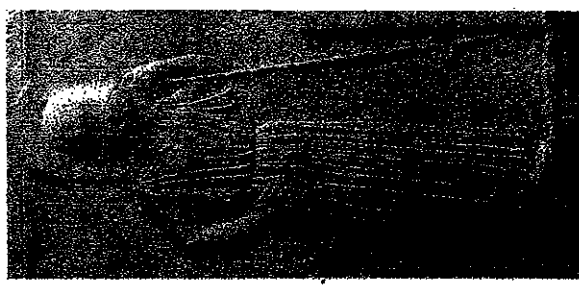
As Telemachus and the goddess-in-disguise talk, the suitors are partying loudly all around them. Telemachus tells the goddess that the men are eating through all they have, courting his mother, and using his house as if it were theirs to wreck and plunder.

45 Pallas Athena was disturbed, and said:

"Ah, bitterly you need Odysseus, then! High time he came back to engage these upstarts. I wish we saw him standing helmeted there in the doorway, holding shield and spear,

There were nine Muses, daughters of Zeus. They inspired people to produce music, poetry, dance, and all the other arts.

2. contending: fighting, arguing.



Athena (c. 460 B.C.). Stone. Acropolis Museum, Athens. Photo: Art Resource

50 looking the way he did when I first knew him. . . .  
If I were you,  
I should take steps to make these men disperse.  
Listen, now, and attend to what I say:

55 at daybreak call the islanders to assembly,  
and speak your will, and call the gods to witness:  
the suitors must go scattering to their homes.

60 Then here's a course for you, if you agree:  
get a sound craft afloat with twenty oars  
and go abroad for news of your lost father—  
perhaps a traveler's tale, or rumored fame  
issued from Zeus abroad in the world of men.  
Talk to that noble sage<sup>62</sup> at Pylos, Nestor,  
then go to Menelaus, the red-haired king  
at Sparta, last man home of all the Achaeans.

65 If you should learn your father is alive  
and coming home, you could hold out a year.  
Or if you learn that he is dead and gone,  
then you can come back to your own dear country  
and raise a mound for him, and burn his gear,  
70 with all the funeral honors due the man,  
and give your mother to another husband.

When you have done all this, or seen it done,  
it will be time to ponder  
concerning these confidants in your house—  
75 how you should kill them, outright or by guile.<sup>65</sup>  
You need not bear this insolence<sup>66</sup> of theirs,  
you are a child no longer."

## Book 2: Telemachus Confronts the Suitors

*Frustrated in his attempts to control the suitors, who are older and more powerful than he is, Telemachus decides to follow Athena's advice. He tries in public to become his "father's son."*

80 When primal Dawn spread on the eastern sky  
her fingers of pink light, Odysseus's true son  
stood up, drew on his tunic and his mantle,  
slung on a sword belt and a new-edged sword,  
tied his smooth feet into good rawhide sandals,  
and left his room, a god's brilliance upon him.  
85 He found the criers with-clarion<sup>84</sup> voices and told them  
to muster the unshorn<sup>85</sup> Achaeans in full assembly.  
The call rang out, and the men came streaming in,  
and when they filled the assembly ground, he entered,  
spear in hand, with two quick hounds at heel;  
Athena lavished on him a sunlit grace

90 that held the eye of the multitude. Old men  
made way for him as he took his father's chair.

*Telemachus complains of the way his family is treated by the suitors. He especially resents the way they treat his mother. The suitors answer through Antinous, the most arrogant suitor of them all. He demands that Penelope choose one of them in marriage, and he blames her for her trickery.*

"For three years now—and it will soon be four—  
she has been breaking the hearts of the Achaeans,  
holding out hope to all, and sending promises  
95 to each man privately—but thinking otherwise.

Here is an instance of her trickery:  
she had her great loom standing in the hall  
and the fine warp of some vast fabric on it;  
we were attending her, and she said to us:

62. sage: wise person.

75. guile: slyness, trickery.

76. insolence: rudeness, lack of respect.

84. clarion: clear and ringing.

85. unshorn: unshaven.



100 'Young men, my suitors, now my lord is dead,  
let me finish my weaving before I marry,  
or else my thread will have been spun in vain.  
It is a shroud<sup>103</sup> I weave for Lord Laertes,  
when cold death comes to lay him on his bier."  
The country wives would hold me in dishonor

105 if he, with all his fortune, lay unshrouded.  
We have men's hearts; she touched them; we agreed.  
So every day she wove on the great loom—  
but every night by torchlight she unwove it;  
and so for three years she deceived the Achaeans.

110 But when the seasons brought the fourth around,  
one of her maids, who knew the secret, told us;  
we found her unraveling the splendid shroud.  
She had to finish then, although she hated it.

115 Now here is the suitors' answer—  
you and all the Achaeans, mark it well:  
dismiss your mother from the house, or make her marry  
the man her father names and she prefers.  
Does she intend to keep us dangling forever?"

*In the face of this stalemate, Telemachus decides to sail away  
in search of his father.*

120 The assembly broke up; everyone went home—  
the suitors home to Odysseus's house again.  
But Telemachus walked down along the shore  
and washed his hands in the foam of the gray sea,  
then said this prayer:

125 "O god of yesterday,  
guest in our house, who told me to take ship  
on the hazy sea for news of my lost father,  
listen to me, be near me:  
the Achaeans only wait, or hope to hinder me,  
the damned insolent suitors most of all."

130 Athena was nearby and came to him,  
putting on Mentor's figure and his tone,  
the warm voice in a lucid flight of words:

135 "You'll never be fainthearted or a fool,  
Telemachus, if you have your father's spirit;  
he finished what he cared to say,

The sea routes will yield their distances  
to his true son, Penelope's true son—  
I doubt another's luck would hold so far.

140 The son is rare who measures with his father,  
and one in a thousand is a better man,  
but you will have the sap and wit

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and prudence—for you get that from Odysseus—  
to give you a fair chance of winning through.  
145 So never mind the suitors and their ways,  
there is no judgment in them, neither do they  
know anything of death and the black terror  
close upon them—doom's day on them all. . . ."

*Quietly, Telemachus goes home and again bears the mockery of  
the suitors. With the help of his old nurse, Eurycleia, he prepares  
for the journey in search of his father. Athena, still disguised as  
Mentor, borrows a ship and rounds up a crew, and off they sail  
in the night. Telemachus's only concern is a human one: he  
worries about his mother and begs the nurse not to tell her he  
has gone until some days have passed.*

### Book 3: The Visit to Nestor

*At sunrise, Telemachus's ship arrives at Pylos, the land of King  
Nestor. Homer's listeners must have felt their interest quickening  
at the appearance of this familiar hero of the Trojan War days—  
we feel the same pleasure today when a favorite character from  
one book or movie suddenly turns up in another. Surrounded by  
his faithful sons and subjects, and dutifully offering prayers to  
the gods, Nestor stands in perfect contrast to Odysseus's family  
and their chaotic situation in Ithaca. Telemachus and Athena  
arrive during a religious ritual, in honor of the sea god Poseidon,  
the "blue-maned god who makes the islands tremble."*

On the shore

150 black bulls were being offered by the people  
to the blue-maned god who makes the islands tremble:  
nine congregations, each five hundred strong,  
led out nine bulls apiece to sacrifice,

155 taking the tripe<sup>154</sup> to eat, while on their altars  
thighbones in fat lay burning for the god.  
Here they put in, furred sail, and beached the ship;  
but Telemachus hung back in disembarking,  
so that Athena turned and said:

"Not the least shyness, now, Telemachus.

160 You came across the open sea for this—  
to find out where the great earth hides your father  
and what the doom was that he came upon.

Go to old Nestor, master charioteer,<sup>163</sup>  
so we may broach the storehouse of his mind.  
165 Ask him with courtesy, and in his wisdom  
he will tell you history and no lies."

But clear-headed Telemachus replied:

154. tripe: lining of the stomach

163. charioteer: Nestor had driven horse-drawn carts used in ancient war.

170 "Mentor, how can I do it, how approach him? I have no practice in elaborate speeches, and for a young man to interrogate an old man seems disrespectful!"

175 But the gray-eyed goddess said: "Reason and heart will give you words, Telemachus; and a spirit will counsel others. I should say the gods were never indifferent to your life."

180 She went on quickly, and he followed her to where the men of Pylos had their altars. Nestor appeared enthroned among his sons, while friends around them skewered the red beef or held it scorching. When they saw the strangers a hail went up, and all that crowd came forward calling out invitations to the feast. . . .

185 Meanwhile the spits were taken off the fire, portions of crisp meat for all. They feasted, and when they had eaten and drunk their fill, at last they heard from Nestor, prince of charioteers:

"Now is the time," he said, "for a few questions, now that our young guests have enjoyed their dinner. Who are you, strangers? . . ."

Telemachus says he is Odysseus's son, and he asks for news of his lost father. Nestor is full of praise for the lost soldier, and he quickly recognizes the heroic qualities of the son. Notice how Nestor prepares us for the later entrance of the absent hero himself.

190 Well, I must say I marvel at the sight of you: your manner of speech couldn't be more like his; one would say No; no boy could speak so well. And all that time at Ilium, he and I

195 were never at odds in council or assembly— in all the good advice we gave the Argives. . . . Who knows, your father might come home some day alone or backed by troops, and have it out with them.

200 If gray-eyed Athena loved you the way she did Odysseus in the old days, in Troy country, where we all went through so much— never have I seen the gods help any man as openly as Athena did your father— well, as I say, if she cared for you that way, there would be those to quit this marriage game."

But prudently Telemachus replied:

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"I can't think what you say will ever happen, sir. It is a dazzling hope. But not for me. It could not be—even if the gods willed it."

210 At this gray-eyed Athena broke in, saying: "What strange talk you permit yourself, Telemachus. A god could save the man by simply wishing it—from the farthest shore in the world."

### Book 4: The Visit to Menelaus and Helen

Nestor sends Telemachus off to continue his search in Sparta. There, two more favorites of the Trojan War story, King Menelaus and his wife, Helen, now live peacefully. Like Homer's Greek audience, we remember throughout Telemachus's stop in Sparta that this Helen was the very cause of the Trojan War itself.

Telemachus is awed at Menelaus's palace, luminous with bronze, gold, amber, silver, and ivory. He does not reveal his identity to Menelaus or to Helen; Athena is still disguised as Mentor.

The old commander Menelaus begins to tell war stories. As he reminisces about Odysseus, the absent hero becomes more and more vivid. Remember that Menelaus does not realize here that he is talking to Odysseus's own son. Menelaus speaks:

215 "No soldier took on so much, went through so much, as Odysseus. That seems to have been his destiny, and this mine—to feel each day the emptiness of his absence, ignorant, even, whether he lived or died."

220 How his old father and his quiet wife, Penelope, must miss him still! And Telemachus, whom he left as a newborn child."

Now hearing these things said, the boy's heart rose in a long pang for his father, and he wept, holding his purple mantle with both hands before his eyes. Menelaus knew him now, and so fell silent with uncertainty

225 whether to let him speak and name his father in his own time, or to inquire, and prompt him. And while he pondered, Helen came out of her scented chamber, a moving grace like Artemis, straight as a shaft of gold. . . . Reclining in her light chair with its footrest, Helen gazed at her husband and demanded:

"Menelaus, my lord, have we yet heard



Helen and Priam, Krater interior. Tarquin Museum. Photo: Art Re.

335 our new guests introduce themselves? Shall I dissemble? what I feel? No, I must say it. Never, anywhere, have I seen so great a likeness in man or woman—but it is truly strange!

240 This boy must be the son of Odysseus, that year the Achaean host made war on Troy—daring all for the wanton that I was."

Menelaus and Helen tell Telemachus they have heard that Odysseus is alive, that he is living with the nymph, Calypso, and that he longs for a way of returning home.

Having increased our suspense, Homer at this point takes us back to Ithaca where we learn that the suitors intend to ambush and kill Telemachus upon his return.

Now, with the themes of the epic established, we are ready to meet Odysseus in person.

Here we will imagine that Homer stops for the night. The listeners would now go off to various corners of the local nobleman's house—as Telemachus and his friends would have done after their evening of talk and feasting with Menelaus and Helen. The blind poet might well have taken a glass of wine before turning in. The people who had heard the bard's stories might have asked questions among themselves and looked forward to the next evening's installment.

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236. dissemble: conceal.

242. wanton: immoral woman.